ENCOUNTERS WITH UNSUNG ARMENIANS

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Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, February 2013

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"And then Aristide , in his gentle, happy voice, with his quite cheerful smile, tells the story. The story of a little boy of seven, who with his family and Armenian families was thrown by the Turks alive into a deep pit. Tar was poured on them and set alight. His father and mother and two brothers and sister were all burnt alive. But he, who was below them all, was still alive when the Turks left, and he was found later by some of the Anaizah Arabs. They took the little boy with them and adopted him into the Anaizah tribe. He was brought up as an Arab, wandering with them over their pastures. But when he was eighteen he went into Mosul and there demanded that papers be given him to show his nationality. He was an Armenian, not an Arab! Yet the blood brotherhood still holds, and to members of the Anaizah he still is one of them.

"I am struck as often before by the fundamental difference of race. Nothing could differ more widely than the attitude of our two chauffeurs to money. Abdullah lets hardly a day pass without clamouring for an advance of salary. If he had his way we would have had the entire amount in advance, and it would, I rather image, have been dissipated before a week was out. With Arab prodigality Abdullah would have splashed it about in the coffee-house. He would have cut a figure! He would have "made a reputation for himself."

"Aristide, the Armenian, has displayed the greatest reluctance to have penny for his salary paid him. "You will keep it for me, Khwaja, until the journey is finished. If I want money for some little expense I will come to you." So far he has demanded only fourpence of his salary—to purchase a pair of socks!

, the Armenian driver says, "It will go towards buying a better taxi."

"And when you have a better taxi?"

"Then I shall earn more and have two taxis."

I can quite easily foresee returning to Syria in twenty years' time, and finding, Aristide, the immensely

rich owner of a large garage, and probably living in a big house in Beirut. And even then, I dare say, he will avoid shaving in the desert because it saves the price of a razor blade."

--From "A Surveying Trip" by Agatha Christie in her "Come, Tell Me How You Live" memoir (1946)

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In the early '30s famed British novelist, Evelyn Waugh, travelled to Ethiopia to report on the coronation of its emperor. In Addis Ababa he hired an Armenian interpreter. Upon his return, Waugh wrote a "Remote People"—a travel book about his trip. This is what he wrote about his Armenian interpreter:

" And doubt I might have had about which to patronize was dissolved , as soon as we turned into the main street, by a stout little man in a black skull-cap, who threw himself at my bridle and led me to the Leon d'Or. During my brief visit I became genuinely attached to this man. He was an Armenian of rare character, named Bergebedgian; he spoke a queer kind of French with remarkable volubility, and I found great delight in all his opinions; I do not think I have ever met a more tolerant man; he had no prejudice or scruples of race, creed, or morals of any kind whatever, there were in his mind none of those opaque patches of inconsidered principles, it was a single translucent pool of placid doubt; whatever splashes of precept and disturbed its surface from time to time had left no ripple; reflections flitted to and fro and left it unchanged.

"Everywhere he went he seemed to be welcome; everywhere he not only adapted, but completely transformed, his manners to the environment. When I came to consider the question I was surprised to realize that the two most accomplished men I had met during this six months I was abroad, the chauffeur who took us to Debra Lebanos and Mr. Bergebedgian, should both have been Armenians. A race of rare competence and the most delicate sensibility. They seem to me the only genuine 'men of the world'."

"On the ship back to England, Waugh met a Turkish traveler. He told the Turk about his experiences with the two Armenians in Ethiopia. "The warmth of admiration for Armenians clearly shocks him, but he is too polite to say so. Instead, he tells me of splendid tortures inflicted on them by his relatives."